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August Strindberg—from an Etching by Zorn

AUGUST STRINDBERG

TILL a few months ago scarcely any one in England or America knew more of Strindberg than they could learn from floating gossip about a mad Swedish author with no very savoury reputation, or from occasional inefficient performances on Sunday evenings of plays that seemed to confirm that reputation as just. A tiny room by the back-door of theatre-land showed a horrible drama about a husband and father goaded into madness by his wife. The Court Theatre, London, gave a play about a girl of family who seduced her footman and then committed suicide. Both plays revealed a strange intensity of dramatic power, an unusually significant use of detail and observation, and a mind beset with the horror of simple facts which are either the most beautiful or the most ugly things in life, according as the mind that sees them is clean and brave or not. Then, about the time that Strindberg died, in the May of last year, England and America began to find opportunities, through the work of ardent students and translators of his books and plays, to revise their scanty and inaccurate knowledge. Those who troubled to inquire found that Strindberg, though an unfortunate and in some senses a very bad husband, was not the notorious evil-liver which rumour had painted him; that, so far from being an immoral author, he was, in purpose and sincerity, almost wholly a moral author; that, besides being a

novelist and dramatist, he was a scientific experimentalist of some knowledge and of high imagination, which had only needed direction and patience to make his achievement valuable; an historian, a philosopher, an alchemist, a naturalist—a man, in fine, of an extraordinary active brain and a prolific writer on subjects of many kinds. And now, with three or four firms of publishers spreading translations of his autobiographical and imaginative works, it is possible to arrive at some idea of a strange mind which had kept Sweden and France and Germany exercised for a good many years.

What is written above is the introduction, in the London "Times," to an eminently sane review of Strindberg's work. The author was sixty-three when he died. He was the son of a man of family and a woman of none. His childhood was unhappy; his youth full of struggle and poverty. He made, and broke, three marriages. Restlessness, unhappiness, the public anger aroused by his attacks on Swedish life and persons, and by his attitude to the movement of the "emancipation of women," drove him abroad. For a period of some five years (of which he gives an account in two of his now published books) he was the victim of delusions, through which he passed into the haven of a form of religion. All his life he was a violent worker, an inexhaustible writer. His mind found rest, if at all, only late.

His energy, or his restlessness, drove him on from belief to belief. In youth a rather blatant freethinker, a "corrupter of youth," as he called himself, an advocate of liberty—if not license—of thought and conduct, he all but surrendered at one period to Catholicism, and reached in middle age a form of Puritanism. The only things stable in him were certain tendencies of his nature that will perhaps emerge from a study of the autobiographical books and of others that he wrote.

We may grant him an exceptional sensitiveness to whatever is disagreeable. That is plain, from the first, in "*The Bondwoman's Son*," his account of his own childhood. What to healthy children, even of good intelligence, is a nuisance—restraint, repression, nagging by parents and so forth—was to August Strindberg torture. He seems to have known, even in childhood, that he was unhappy to a degree which people well versed in the minds of children believe very uncommon. In later years he was to make use of this sensitiveness, not only in his studies of his own mind, but in his plays and novels. The boy Strindberg was the father of the acutely suffering man in *The Father*, or of Maurice, the young playwright who topples through vice into misery and so into religion, in *There are Crimes and Crimes*. "*The Bondwoman's Son*" gives us also another clue to his nature. This is an ugly business and we propose to attack it at once and get it over. At the age of eight Strindberg determined to kill himself because of his feelings for a little girl. The story might be passed over as merely silly, if he had not lived to write "*The Confession of a Fool*."

That is the book in which, without any kind of reticence, he tells the story of his first marriage—his relations with the lady before their legal union, their miserable life together, and the unpleasant details of its ending. It is a story that ought only to be told *in camera*, and we refer to it merely for the elucidation of a single element in the author's nature. It was not self-deception that induced Strindberg to declare that the chief obstacle to his separation from his first wife was his sense of honour and of the integrity of the family. He believed firmly in the integrity of the family; he professed to believe that woman had no other mission in life but to be the link between the father and his children. But a patient reading of "*The Confession of a Fool*" makes it clear that what bound him to his first wife was not so much the motives he pleads, as a physical obsession. And it is only fair to warn the intending reader of Strindberg's works that throughout them his attitude on these matters is not healthy, is not normal.

Of what value to humanity is the study of the abnormal? There is a tendency at present to put a wrong emphasis upon it. Just as every man is the better for having some knowledge of the human body in health and sickness, so every man is the better for having some knowledge of the human mind in health and sickness. But here, as in knowledge of all kinds, the manner of presentation is everything. It is right for the layman to know that soap and water, and plenty of them, are good for the skin, and why; it is not good for him to be presented with a work on skin

diseases as an ennobling work of literature. In the same way, anyone with a tendency to sex-obsession or persecution mania may be the better for knowing what is wrong with him and how he may get his mind clean. The normal mind cannot be the better for being dragged through a minute analysis of such uncleanness, such wretchedness, as are to be found in the three autobiographical books before us. "An American Critic," we read in one of the introductions, "says 'Strindberg is the greatest subjectivist of all time.' Certainly neither Augustine, Rousseau, nor Tolstoy have laid bare their souls to the finest fibre with more ruthless sincerity than the great Swedish realist." But we do not praise—grammatically or ungrammatically—the old lady in the "hydro" because her description of her "symptoms" is more vivid and particular than any we have heard before. We leave the room. And to all who are not professional healers of mind or body the study of such books as "Inferno" or "Legends" must be, for all their "ruthless sincerity," as profitless and as disagreeable as the drawing-room talk of the hydro. Augustine—Rousseau—Tolstoy: two of them were great and beautiful souls, whose struggles towards peace cannot but quicken the reader through his sense of beauty, however much he may disagree with their conclusions. The other was a far more normal person than Strindberg; and, not to speak of its delicate lights and shades, of the art and wit of the writing, his "Confessions" are so full of the frailties of the average man that they induced in any sane reader a healthy laugh at his own expense.

The "ruthless sincerity" of Strindberg has produced something quite different.

In Strindberg's kind of sensitiveness—the acute feeling of what happens to oneself, whether physically or mentally—lies the germ of egomania. In "Inferno" and "Legends" Strindberg shows us in full blast the egomania that developed out of his sensitiveness. They form the description of his life in Paris and elsewhere during the years when he was subject to delusions. The delusions were of a kind that we believe to be well known to students of mental aberration. He is always pursued by enemies, whose favourite plan is to fix electric wires to his bed and so attack his heart. He is consumed by self-pity. If a noise occurs in his restaurant or his hotel, it was made purposely to annoy him. Joined with this—and indeed its counterpart, since such delusions as these presuppose an overweening regard for self—is spiritual pride. He visits a set of lively friends, and is annoyed with their gaiety, their very kindness to him.

"Had I avoided these people out of unjustifiable pride it would have been logical to punish me for it, but as my avoidance of them sprang from a desire to purify myself and to deepen my spiritual life in self-communion, I do not understand the ways of Providence"—of Providence, who ought, of course, to have seen that his condescension in mixing with sinners was rewarded on the spot. A friend invites him to breakfast, and—"I decline, because the right bank is forbidden to me; it is the so-called 'world,' the world of the living and of vanity."

He visits the house where his little daughter is living, and finds that he must give up his solitary morning walk, during which he was "all soul," in order to take his child with him, listen to her prattle, and answer her questions. "It is intensely annoying. . . . What a penance—to be loved!" And what of the men to whom such "penance" would be joy? So, through a growing sensitiveness to omens and supernatural hints, in which everything that he sees is directed at himself, he comes by degrees to learn that not all his enemies are mortal. His mother-in-law gives him for dinner calves' head, a dish that he dislikes. "It is too much! Formerly I attributed these annoyances to feminine malice; now I acquit every one, and say, 'It is the Devil!'" Men are given over to the Prince of this World, and suicide is the only refuge. A little later he learns from Swedenborg that it is not the Devil. It is God who sends these omens, these persecutions—

"Earth, earth is hell—the dungeon appointed by a superior power, in which I cannot move a step without injuring the happiness of others, and in which others cannot remain happy without hurting me. . . .

"Let us therefore suffer without hoping for any real joy in life, for, my brothers, we are in hell. . . . Let us rejoice in our torments, as though they were the paying off of so many debts, and let us count it a mercy that we do not know the real reason why we are punished. . . .

"Self-contempt, anger at one's own personality, the result of vain endeavours to improve oneself—that is the way to higher life."

Thus this ardent thinker, this lover of intellectual strife, sinks in the last surrender. His faith deserts him, and he runs for shelter to a faith that is no faith, but a folding of the hands in despair. For revulsions of this kind there is usually a physiological basis. Perhaps the following quotation may give a hint:

"Often it happens that the mere love of drink gets the upper hand, accompanied by unbridled hilarity and cynical suggestions. One's lower nature breaks through and the brutal instincts find free scope. It is so pleasant to be an animal for awhile, one thinks to oneself, and besides life is not always so cheerful, and so on, to the same effect. One day, after I have for some time taken part in riotous drinking bouts, I am on the way to my restaurant. I pass by an undertaker's shop where a coffin is exposed to view. The street is strewn with fir branches, and the great bell of the cathedral is tolling a knell. Arrived at the restaurant, I find my table companion in trouble, as he has come straight from the hospital, where he has taken leave of a dying friend. As I return home after dinner by back streets, where I have not been before, I meet two funeral processions. How everything reeks of death today, and the tolling of the knell recommences!"

There is plenty of evidence in these pages of one secret of Strindberg's state of mind. If this man, one reflects, had taken plenty of exercise, had known the value of cold water in large quantities for internal and external use, had tuned himself up, body and mind, by the simple self-mastery implied in these things, would not his great brain

have produced work with more in it of the beauty that preserves? The other reflection is this: that some allowance must be made for the period in which he spent his earlier years. There is abundant evidence in these books that the Sweden of his youth was passing through a period which only the German language has a phrase to describe—*Sturm und Drang*—a period of revolt against accepted forms and beliefs, in which extravagance and alcohol played parts not easily measured by better balanced and deeper rooted peoples. Strindberg lived to see the failure of his own generation's high hopes. As the growth had been violent, the withering was devastation. Naturalism, materialism, had proclaimed illimitable powers in human nature. One by one its champions dropped off, as Strindberg tells us, into madhouses, destitution, or suicide. The reaction helped to drive Strindberg himself through madness into contempt of human nature, and that kind of faith in God which is a denial of God's goodness.

Other writers have been mad; other writers have been oppressed with a sense of sin. But assuredly not all madness sees further than sanity. Lucretius went mad, and he too was *contemptor divom*; but in his poem his vitality and his love of life and of beauty

exorcise the demons of pessimism and despair. Dante and Heine both passed through hell; and Bunyan and Cowper suffered agonies of remorse. But in all these we may find one or both of two qualities that Strindberg lacked—qualities of mind, or of character, that have little connection with qualities of brain. Either they shoulder the burden and fight through their despair like men of courage and self-mastery, or they have in them an essential sweetness, an *επιείκεια*, which stands in place of faith in life and faith in man to such of them as believe that they have no such faith. In Strindberg one searches in vain for any such qualities. Setting aside the autobiographical works, his literature as a whole is a literature of hate and of ugliness. Life is hell, he implies, even in works written before the period of his delusions; made hell by the conflict of man and woman, by the breaking up of old standards and the breaking down of new. And the intensity of his observation only emphasizes the partiality of his vision. Strange, "mystical" plays like *The Dream Play*, romantic plays like *Margit*, sharply naturalistic plays like *The Father* or *Miss Julia*, all tell the same story—of a mind raging at life because it is blind to three-quarters of life, and cursing the world because it has not learned the rudiments of self-mastery.